

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**“Structuring National Security and Homeland
Security at the White House”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
February 12, 2009

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The decision on whether or not the Homeland Security Council and the National Security Council should be merged should not be taken lightly. While some dismiss this question as being too “Inside the Beltway,” a decision to merge these two councils could have serious unintended consequences.

The NSC has a long and storied history. Established in 1947 by Congress as part of a complete restructuring of the nation’s entire security apparatus, the NSC advises the President on national security and foreign policy. Over the years, it has

grown in size, power, and influence. It has a sizeable budget and employs about 250 staff – including many experienced military and foreign-service officers.

The NSC's partner in coordinating security policy at the White House – the HSC – is far newer. Established in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the HSC advises the President on all homeland security matters. It has the responsibility to coordinate more than 30 federal departments and agencies with homeland security responsibilities. The HSC must also work with State, local, tribal, and private sector officials who play a vital role in all stages from prevention to recovery from all hazards, whether man-made or natural. Notwithstanding its important mission, the HSC has only a modest budget and 45

employees – about one-fifth the size of the NSC's complement of experienced staff.

Some have advocated a merger of the HSC and NSC, but eliminating an independent HSC may not be the best available option. An independent HSC, with more resources, a larger, more experienced staff, and the backing of President Obama, would enhance the council's stature and its ability to coordinate federal departments and agencies, State, local, and tribal governments, and the private sector. A strong, independent HSC could resolve many of the concerns raised by merger advocates without the potential unintended consequences that a merger might cause.

Merger advocates need to answer a number of difficult questions.

Are there any examples of how having a separate HSC and NSC has actually impeded or undermined national security?

To the best of my knowledge, there are none. To the contrary, the nation has achieved considerable success in the one area in which the HSC and the NSC share joint responsibility – counter-terrorism policy. Multiple terrorist attacks have been stopped, including a 2002 plot to hijack an airplane and fly it into the tallest skyscraper in Los Angeles, a 2003 plot to hijack and crash planes into targets on the East Coast, and a 2006 plot to blow up multiple passenger jets traveling from London.

Another important question: Will the NSC, with its traditional focus on international diplomatic and

military issues, devote enough time and attention to the domestic aspects of homeland security?

I am very concerned that vitally important domestic security issues will become less visible within the White House after a merger. These issues include emergency preparedness and response, critical infrastructure protection, and disaster recovery. The breadth of issues with which the National Security Advisor must contend on a daily basis is daunting: managing the conduct of two active, ongoing wars; attempting to contain terrorism and proliferation activities; and deciding the future of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. And, this is just a sampling.

Is it really feasible or practical to add an entirely new – and massive – portfolio of domestic issues to

that weighty agenda? I am further concerned that added responsibility for issues, such as levee integrity in New Orleans, flooding in Maine, an ice storm in Kentucky, or a wildfire in California, will divert the NSC's primary focus from the nation's military and diplomatic missions.

No matter how qualified, having one of the NSC's many deputies as the senior most White House official in charge of homeland security, will likely not be enough to ensure sufficient focus on homeland security issues. Disaster declarations, catastrophic planning, grant funding, and State and local information sharing must receive high-level support and attention in the White House.

In a city where rank matters, I also question whether a Deputy will have sufficient stature to

compel more senior officials, particularly members of the President's Cabinet, to take action on a pressing homeland security issue.

So, my next question is this: given these realities, who will referee the inevitable turf battles and rivalries between the Department of Homeland Security and other federal departments and agencies?

Because DHS is still a relatively new Department, it is particularly vulnerable to the machinations of other agencies seeking to enhance their homeland security footprint. The Department of Justice, for example, sought to minimize DHS's role in terrorist bombing prevention despite a Presidential directive to the contrary - delaying the

release of a national bombing prevention strategy and implementation plan by more than a year.

Almost six years since its inception, DHS is still enmeshed in jurisdictional disputes with other Departments over the homeland security mission, battling HHS over the responsibility for medical preparedness and response and jousting with USDA over agricultural inspections and agro-terrorism. The Department needs a neutral arbiter in the White House to settle disputes like these. An effective, independent HSC fulfills that essential role. An NSC, not focused relentlessly on the homeland, will most certainly fail.

I welcome our witnesses, and I look forward to their testimony.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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